

MOVING TOGETHER IN ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE: CALL FOR SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION TOWARDS ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Today's socio-environmental predicament indicates that our global social system is in a state of crisis. The situation in Africa is compelling everyone concerned to join others in dealing with this crisis bedeviling humanity in the continent and beyond. Environmental social work is an essential part of the endeavour to reduce the footprints that people make on the environment, while ensuring that resources are shared equitably across all of the earth's inhabitants, its flora and fauna. Backed by theoretical background and author's experience, the article posits that the achievement of social justice requires that social work be a significant player in this major transformation by incorporating forgotten environmental issues in their practice. This paper urges African social workers to develop and assimilate a new eco-social perspective through collective consciousness is fundamental for a just and sustainable future in the continent.

Key words: environmental justice; social work; Africa

Introduction

The complexity of environmental problems asks for action on various levels and within a complex network of social relations. For so long, social work profession has been lauded for its unrelenting fight for social justice across the globe. From its genesis, social work has naturally placed the theme of helping at the centre of professional practice (Morales et al, 2010). With industrialisation, urbanisation and mechanisation, the world is already in state of imminent danger as bio-space continues to suffer. This is happening at a time when every human being is threatened by environmental crisis consequences such as poverty, death, diseases, inequalities, famine, land contamination, pollution and other related challenges. As a profession with a long-standing declared heart on person-in-environment, social work is expected to play a leadership role in interdisciplinary efforts to tackle environmental threats to human's well-being and their continued existence. Nevertheless, the profession has generally been inaudible or less than relevant in tackling environmental challenges facing the world today (Zapf, 2010). The impact of environmental crisis in Africa and its subsequent

influence on poverty, inequalities and development makes it difficult for the profession to disregard. Social workers' responsibility to endorse social justice, work to eradicate structural inequalities ranging from poverty to the stigmatisation of people who are different and working to realise human rights is spelt out in both the international definition of social work and ethical codes for professional practice (Dominelli, 2012). While green social work luminaries such as Dominelli, Coates and others have foresight on encroaching environmental crisis across the globe, social work profession in most affected areas such as Africa remains passive in dynamically responding to such problem. This paper argues that, it is difficult for social work profession to remain silent on current environmental challenges in Africa. The impact of environmental crisis on vulnerable people is highlighted and the role of profession is also given attention in this paper.

The world's nations are determined to protect the planet from degradation through sustainable consumption and production, sustainably managing its natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change, so that it can support the needs of the present and future generations (United Nations, 2015). This is because; there is a reality that environmental disasters come with many challenges which mostly affect the marginalised people. From collective consciousness, a profession like social work is well dignified to advocate for both preventive and prescriptive environmental measures in partnership with the communities in question. While social workers in other continents such as Europe are making notable strides towards environmental justice (Dominelli, 2013; Mathende, 2016), African social workers are still playing the role of an apprenticeship to the whole problem. However, the impact of environmental disaster continues to worsen the vulnerability of people in Africa. This calls for an African social worker who cannot sit on his/her laurels but move with times to speak for the affected population as required by professional ethics and values. The field of environmental justice also requires the skills which social workers can offer in order to move towards a sustainable and socially conscious change. Environmental paradigm is also embedded in the politics of sustainable development in the post Millennium Development Goals (MDGS) as presented at UN General Assembly 2015 where world Nations envisioned it for the next 15 years (ending 2030) in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015).

With regards to traction of environmental discourse, social work paradigm has been quiet, paying much attention on person-in-environment models together with ontological and epistemological popularisation of social environment. Another key reason why social work should be part of environmental justice is that environmental crisis has also worsened socio-economic inequalities among people in the society. Surprisingly, from its historical evolution, social work has challenged inequities among individuals and groups and, today its core mission is to challenge injustices and oppression of marginalised people. An analysis of power, along with an appreciation for the unique constraints of gender, race and geography, is instrumental in the articulation of environmental threats and eco-sustainable solutions (David et al, 2013; Green and McDermott, 2010). This goes in line with the definition of environment, which spells out the totality of social, biological and physical or chemical as well as entirety that compose the nature and man-made surroundings (Chauhan, 2011:1). Environmental justice opens up an exciting space where social work has much to contribute in protecting humanity especially in the African context where the profession is doing little to realise the impact of environmental crisis on social and economic lives of marginalised people. The mission of social work which involves the enhancement of social functioning through fulfilment of basic needs among the vulnerable requires that environmental justice be given pertinent position within professional scope. To fulfill that mission, Morales et al (2010) suggest that social workers must possess a broad range of knowledge about the functioning of people and social institutions, as well as having a variety of skills for facilitating change in how individuals, organizations, and other social structures operate.

Many scholars (Dominelli, 2012; Mathende and Ndapi, 2016; Muzingili, 2016) believe that this is time for social work profession in Africa to move towards new paradigm, a new understanding that values the relationship between social interaction and physical environment. In recent times, as witnessed at global stage, every person is directly and indirectly affected by his or her physical surrounding. As this paper argues, incorporation of environmental justice in social work is not just fundamental but obligatory for the naturally caring profession. Morito (2002) clarifies an important distinction between thinking about ecology and thinking ecologically. As indicated by isolated and unsolicited interventions in environmental issues, the profession has been thinking about ecology though not acting ecologically. For instance, ecological issues cannot be relegated to one separate discipline assigned exclusive responsibilities for the protection of fatally endangered physical

environment but social workers in Africa are almost static in embracing such critical issues. This is reflected in various activities such as non-incorporation of environmental issues in social work curriculum (Muzingili, 2016), lean literature on environmental issues (Mathende and Ndapi, 2016) and lack of professional debates on effects of environmental crisis among vulnerable people in Africa. Ecological thinking as one might argue, is a process, a worldview, a set of principles, an awareness that must affect all approaches to enquiry and practice if we are to survive. Following Morito (2002)'s conceptualisation, the discussion for this article is not about thinking of environment from a social work perspective; rather, the emphasis is on the importance of the profession to reflect and act environmentally if it intends to have significance in addressing the serious environmental concerns facing humankind in Africa and beyond. Since the profession continues to work towards safe, equal and ethical treatment of all people, the destiny of the natural environment is becoming increasingly noteworthy. This concurs with various scholars (Hoff and Polack, 1993; Miley, 2005; Muzingili, 2016) who observe that social work originates from humanitarian and democratic ideals. While the profession reaffirms the significance of social environment, consideration of environmental paradigm is urged for it to maintain its legacy; the legacy of fighting for equality and justice for all people in the sphere of living. Thus, current environmental burden belongs to collective thinking which invites, among others, the fearless profession to fight and protect its clientele system.

Conceptualising environmental justice

The symbiotic connection between people and environmental justice is gaining ascendancy today but little in terms of environmental justice theories has been written. There are many theories advanced with regard to man's interaction with environment especially in the field of environmental sociology. Environmental justice is "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, colour, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies" (Bullard and Johnson, p. 558 in Nussbaraum, 2013). In this paper, we use David Schlosberg's political theory of defining environmental justice.

While calls for environmental justice have grown recently, very little attention has been paid to exactly what the 'justice' of environmental justice refers to, particularly in the realm of

social movement demands (Schlosberg, 2007). So popular in understanding of environmental justice are issues of equity, or the distribution of environmental ills and benefits. The focus on distribution as form of justice has been a theorisation of liberal theorist. However, Schlosberg believes that environmental justice must go beyond the question of distribution. The argument is that, the justice being sought by global environmental justice is really threefold: equity in the distribution of environmental risk, recognition of the diversity of the participants and experiences in affected communities, and participation in the political processes which create and manage environmental policy. Recognition and participation are precondition features of social work which entails respect and worth of the people. Cannavo (2007) notes that the existence of three different notions of justice in movement, simultaneously, demonstrates the plausibility of a plural yet unified theory and practice of justice. Environmental political theory is now extending the boundaries of the political to include the natural world and people's relations with it. In order to understand the domain of environmental crisis, Schlosberg believes that, some environmental political theorists are integrating ecocentrism that is, moral consideration for nature itself into conceptions of political community. To this end, environmental justices must integrate issues with participation and recognition not just distribution. The ardent critics of distributive theory of liberalists argues that while distribution is a key element of justice but none of them examine thoroughly the cultural, economic, symbolic and institutional issues underlying that process of distribution.

Environmental crisis has implication on services provision and its consequences undermine access to social services such as health, education, food, water and sanitation and others. Meanwhile, the environmental justice movement has bridged the divide between nature and society in another way, urging the environmentalists to pursue not just the protection of wilderness and natural systems but also the ecological health of human communities, specifically poor, minority, and indigenous communities (Schlosberg, 2007). Today's environmental crisis in Africa has much effect on people who are less well-off and marginalised. It is the same section of people who are paying high price of environmental injustice but they are not given enough recognition and participation in dealing with those challenges. This typifies the call for social work profession which mediate between people and their surroundings. Therefore, defining environmental justice breaks vital ground not

only in advancing political theory's engagement with nature but also in crafting a theoretical and political framework that draws together moral consideration for nonhuman nature with environmental justice concerns. In fact, Schlosberg builds from the discourse of the environmental justice movement to extend justice to our relations with the natural world. The same author also offers a powerful critique of liberal theories of justice and their often singular focus on distribution, offering a more inclusive notion of justice that embraces recognition, capabilities, and participatory democracy (Cannavo, 2007). Schlosberg argues that justice is not only and not even primarily about securing a fair distribution of goods. Treating others justly also involves recognising their membership in the moral and political community, promoting the capabilities needed for their functioning and flourishing, and ensuring their inclusion in political decision-making. The foregoing argument is in congruence with salient themes of versatile approach in social work which calls professionals to understand dynamics in people's interaction with their environment. Poor people need protection in terms of policies and programmes which recognise their position during and post environmental crisis.

Moreover, Schlosberg maintains that distribution, recognition, capabilities, and participation are interrelated and interdependent one cannot pursue one dimension of justice in isolation (Cannavo, 2007). Schlosberg believes that justice concerns not only individuals but also collectivities—that is, social groups and environmental systems. Social work systems theory integrates the connection of the person to his/her environment, social, political, cultural and economic. Although bio-space is not given enough attention in current social work discourse; the profession accept the notion that every individual is surrounded by certain forces. Schlosberg also suggests the foundations of a more unified green movement, built on a set of common conceptions of justice, though he rejects “a singular, overarching, and static definition of justice” for all cases. Environmental justice instead seeks a range of interrelated dimensions and conceptions of justice that can be variously and vicariously applied to humans and nonhumans, individuals and collectivities, on a case by- case basis. If such notion is recognised, vulnerable people can get protection from far reaching impact of environmental crisis. Schlosberg's development of an elaborate, multifaceted theory of justice and on ethics and international affairs extension to relations between humans and nature is certainly imperative for social workers. It is argued that individual organisms and

natural systems are entitled to a fair share of essential goods, recognition as part of an extended community, development and enjoyment of capabilities for flourishing, and some measure of inclusion in political processes. This bivalent argument is important for social workers in Africa and beyond that people's interaction with their physical environment is important. Social work is a profession that respond to a need (Morales et al, 2010), and social workers need to be versatile enough in embracing dynamics of the day. Environmental issues were not within the scope of the profession since its genesis but current environmental tides and their consequential impact on vulnerable people requires a naturally caring profession to rise to the occasion and help those who are grossly affected.

Social justice principles are central to social work practice. Adherence to these principles encourages social workers to scrutinise all their helping activities through the practical lenses of equality, fairness, and egalitarianism. For example, climate change has brought continental environmental crisis relating to biodiversity loss, unavailability of fertile land, unsustainable food production and damaged finite water and energy resources (Muzingili, 2016). Social workers are committed to the idea that all clients are equal regardless of their position, status, or power. In addition, they ensure that all clients have a right to basic needs and opportunities are made available to all, basing on achievement rather than ascriptive criteria. This has made social workers to participate in several developmental projects in search of sustainable development. In spite of the growing link between social and environmental problems; environmental justice has remained marginalised by social work despite its claimed awareness of the broader social environment. In general, social work's problem solving methods are not only compatible with environmental approaches to sustainability but also provide the much needed sensitivity to social justice apprehensions. In Africa, social workers have a big role in sustainable development, but at least they must be able to predict the influence of environment related problems like climate change, deforestation, global warming and others on socio-economic situation of vulnerable communities.

Environmental crisis, vulnerable people and social work intervention

Environmental justice is a primary contrivance in reducing inequalities among people. Bolan (1994:146) notes that "the threads linking environmental pollution and social welfare stand much more exposed under extreme conditions." One of the fathomable realities is that sumptuous and

ravenous capitalist ideology through industrialisation and mechanisations are chief contributors to environmental damages, not only the poor people (Dominelli, 2012). Environmental destructions are carried disproportionately by disadvantaged and marginalised groups (Gray & Coates, 2012). For example, environmental disasters are associated with closure of schools, displacements, diseases outbreak and other psychosocial problems. Situation is more complex in African states where disaster preparedness measures and policies are lean (Muzingili, 2016). African people living in poverty not only are undersupplied of adequate material goods, but also lack the mechanisms by which to survive with encroaching environmental ruin. However, the rich are able to insulate themselves against environmental damage for much longer than the poor (Chauham, 2011). In African countries like Zimbabwe, low-income individuals and families continue to live in contaminated neighbourhoods, suffer from dwindling resources, and work in unsafe and poisonous conditions. Social work with its skills and values; provides empathy, warmth and unconditional love for those affected at the same time negotiating with contributors to enhance social functioning of those who are neglected. As argued earlier, this is a human rights issue. Perhaps, it follows that social work is urged to begin to mobilise around notions of appropriate distribution of resources and responsible management of the consequences caused by environmental crisis. Dominelli (2012) believes that environmental social work is best suited in utilising limited natural resources such as land, air, water, energy sources and minerals for the benefit of all rather than the privileged few. Nevertheless, Coates (2003) predicted that this is not a popular endeavour because the challenge is complex as it calls on the rich to reduce consumption of resources so that the poor can have equity. Social workers must also realise that people living in poverty have little incentive to fight against environmental destruction by the virtue of their sensitive short-term needs. When environmental crisis surface, the poor people are intrinsically affected compared to their rich counterparts. This implies that they need support before, during and after environmental disasters.

Poor people are unjustifiably located in degraded environments, poor housing, inadequate built infrastructures including utilities and water and suffer from health inequalities. Toxic wastes are also dumped in poor communities (Chauham, 2011). Social and community workers have generally been complicit in helping to maintain a dominant focus on economy and growth within social justice paradigm. Social Work activists may find it beneficial to seek a balance between economy and environment, and begin to articulate the fact that one is inherently dependent on the other. Wildfires caused by human negligence and natural events such as lightning strikes have caused millions of hectares of forests to burn in both temperate and tropical climates like in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In failing to gain a considerable presence in the environmental justice field, and by not taking advantage of the

opportunity to grasp environmental justice as a legitimate professional identity (David et al, 2013; Hoff, 1994; Hoff and McNutt, 1994; Philai and Gupta, n.d), the social work profession is neglecting its ethical responsibility to the individuals it serves. Rapid industrialisation has left vulnerable people with polluted rivers, contaminated soil, depleted wildlife and exhausted natural resources. Chauham (2011:191) notes that: “the root cause of environmental pollution has been man’s misbehaviour with the nature under false ego that he is the master of nature.” The author further notes that; the expropriation of lands, especially those of indigenous African people for development purposes, often without having a say in what happens or receiving compensation for what is lost, leaves them in precarious situations. Society’s unchecked intervention on bio-space may negate its capacity to eke out a living from healthy environment. Chambers (1988) calls this as ‘physical environment of poverty’ and is itself not conducive to the production and reproduction of liveable socio-economic conditions of poor communities. Of late, environmental crisis has not only affected the provision of social services but has also increased death toll due droughts, drowning and famine.

Africa is the major victim of dirty energy and climate damaged economy. Darkoh (2013), highlighting on rate of desertification and impact of climate change on socio-economic development, note that never before has the future of life on our planet been a matter of such a great concern as it is today. For the past decades, social development approaches including developmental social work, have focused on building basic capacity among individuals, groups, and communities through addressing issues of basic needs (Midgley & Conley, 2010). This was based on the assumption that, as individuals gain the capacity to participate in social and economic institutions, the number of realistic social choices is bound to increase. Though this approach is now widely attributed to Sen’s theories of functioning and capabilities (Sen, 2000), it had already been part and parcel of social work approaches to community building and development in Africa. Social development approaches have a long history in social work and are well-positioned to address human development issues with respect to sustainability policies and programmes (Mohan, 2007). However, the position of environmental justice is still meagre. A holistic analysis of the micro-, meso- and macro-structures of the contexts of resources and problems of individuals and communities is still limited among social workers in Africa. In Africa, food scarcities, land degradation, air pollution, unregulated waste, acidic water and industrial effluent among others, are today’s

serious problems besetting vulnerable people. All these result in the disturbance of social fabric and developmental programmes. Advocating for environmental justice is intertwined with social justice. Dominelli (2012) presents the following as the reasons for calling environmental justice in social work:

- *To affirm human rights and social justice and enhance people's well-being in order to provide the rationale for social workers' involvement in environmental justice.*
- *To affirm interdependencies between people, their physical, social, political, economic and cultural environments as part of one whole.*
- *To care for others and be cared by others, including the duty to care for planet earth*

McNutt (1994:43) notes that: "social policy cannot be sustainable unless the society that supports it is sustainable." Therefore, attempts to improve social conditions may be lost if society itself lacks clean air, drinkable water and adequate food. It is clear that the groups that are immediately and profoundly affected by environmental destruction are those that face multiple systems of vulnerability in Africa. Tackling social and structural inequalities requires a clear understanding of the issues including inegalitarian power relations and unequal distribution of the earth's resources (Dominelli, 2012). However, many theorists professed that 'social workers will encounter the consequences of environmental contamination in their work with clients, whatever the field of practice' (Soine, 1987: 44). Dominelli as one of the passionate advocates of green social work noted that:

'The aim of green social work is to work for the reform of the socio-political and economic forces that have a deleterious impact upon the quality of life of poor and marginalised populations, secure the policy changes and social transformations necessary for enhancing the well-being of people and the planet today and in the future and advance the duty to care for others and the right to be cared by others' (Dominelli, 2012: 25).

As African continent can testify, no one and nothing is escaping the cataclysmic impact of climatic change, pollution and recklessness on the physical environment. For many years, social workers in Africa have advocated for developmental social work in their bid to change

challenges related to poverty, inequalities and unemployment. This is a conceivable theme but in all its pillars of development, there was no physical environment for critical thinking in devising the programmes and curricula. Social workers must also appreciate that the consequences of environmental crises and unavailability of natural resources have the strongest impact on the most vulnerable people. Yet much remains to be done by social workers as their clients are at receiving end of environmental damages. More imperatively, from the sustainability perspective, social work discipline does so taking into account the generational ties that bind people within groups, families, and communities. In general, social work offers skill sets and tools necessary to address issues of intergenerational equity characteristic of ecological approaches to sustainability. As noted hitherto, social work's involvement in environmental issues is part of preventive measures to continental resource distribution challenges.

Environmental Justice as human rights discourse in social work practice

Environmental justice is part of human rights discourse. As noted earlier, environmental crisis has infringed upon many human rights such as education, health, clean environment and others. The role of social work profession in human rights has been elaborated by a number of scholars (Dewane, 2011; Dominelli, 2012; Mapp, 2007; Reichert, 2003), and cannot be negotiated within professional obligation. Environmental justice discourse is a part of human rights framework which considers environment as a part of discussion on justice; including the rights of fauna and flora as such, not only as a resource of humans. Environmental human rights provide a newly articulated value frame for doing social work in fragile bio-space areas such as Africa. The fundamental values of social work, such as the right to human dignity and the right to self-determination, are essentially human rights values, though they are not always articulated in the language of environmental space. Morales et al (2010) note that social workers are committed to reforming existing laws, procedures, and attitudes until they are more responsive to human needs. Given the long history of human rights values in social work, the human rights perspective is now receiving widespread attention as a universal medium for the use of social work tools (Dewane, 2011). The debate on abating or reversing environmental damages such as climate change trends has often been stalled by questions pertaining to who are the users or gainers to curb the cause. The social work profession is strongly founded on human rights values, changing community

attitudes and lobbying for friendly environmental policies and programmes to achieve its mandate of transforming societies. Social work interventions at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels are scrutinised for violation of human rights standards.

Critics point out that environmental destruction in Africa is irrefutably tied to Western capitalist constructs of individualism, greed consumerism and unmitigated growth. Industrialised societies have produced a dominant commercial culture that believes all resources and social inequities can be resolved through development, invention, high finance and growth – always growth catchword (Hawken, 1993). This has led to pollution and the extraction of irreplaceable resources in developing continents like Africa. Africa is also a focal point for resource extraction and waste dumping site again. Clark (1989:56) writes: “more and more are Western societies becoming assemblages of unhappy, alienated individuals, proud of their freedom from dependence on others, unaware that it is the rejection of their mutual relatedness that creates their unhappiness.” It has also helped to create communities of isolated individuals and families who are led to believe that consumption is salvation. This tendency impairs community relationships and has undeniable environmental consequences, as consumption is viewed as a means by which to achieve fulfilment, and as a replacement for meaningful social interaction.

Perhaps, then, it is through the acknowledgement of the interdependence of community and ecology that environmental justice change may occur. It is because “we now share one another’s fate, it is increasingly clear that promoting the well-being of others directly promotes our own” (Elgin, 2000: 115). Salih (2001:3) notes that “if environmental change impairs the environmental functions necessary for the maintenance of nature and the natural resources on which society depends for production, its consequences are social.” In agrarian dependent societies such as the case of Africa, environmental predicament militates against socio-economic development of people. This is the same goal that motivates social work conviction to work among vulnerable society or groups of people. It is the time; therefore, for the profession to look both backward and forward by assimilating the environmental justice in its contemporary practice in Africa.

Conclusion

Social work, in its various forms, addresses the multiple and complex transactions between people and their environments. Its mission is to enable all people to develop their full potential, enrich their lives, and prevent dysfunction. Professional social work is focused on problem solving and in bringing change. Elgin (2000:11) writes, “the entire human population is confronted with a common predicament whose solution will require us to work together.” Social workers possess many of the skills required to work for environmental protection and recovery. This is an opportunity for the profession to engage with an issue that will eventually transcend class, race, geography and gender. To ensure resilience for social change in Africa, social work can contribute through enhancing capabilities of people and building social awareness on environmental justice. Community building, networking and alliances with other social actors have also a pivotal role in a change-oriented social work practice.

Social work in Africa has the abilities and interest to be a leader in the development of environmental practice and policy. Social workers have the responsibility to not only become involved with communities suffering from imminent or current environmental damage but to begin to change the ways in which their profession views physical environment. This may take the form of political activism, advocating for change within and outside the realm of social work, and discussing how local community is the only way forward for a world that continues to devour itself. If social work desires to continue to cite human protection and empowerment as a central principle, then the conservation of the environment must become a central priority. While there is a growth in the awareness about environmental justice, the topic is still under-acknowledged in the social work profession. There is a lack of available information on the substantial role and its involvement in environmental crisis in Africa. It is, therefore, crucial for social workers, current and future, to start addressing environmental inequalities endured by the individuals the profession serves.

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